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UNUSUAL FORMS OF ARDHANĀRĪŚVARA

The principle of duality and the concept of bisexuality in man and nature has been part of civilization. Biologically a human being is not a pure unisexual organism. Each being has both the male and the female within. It is the domination of one over the other which determines the sexuality. Psychologists like Freud and Jung have worked extensively on the duality of man. Whether it was the Occident or the Oriental civilization, the man woman, active passive relationship has been an integral part of their philosophy, religious and social practices. In the ancient Greek and Egyptian civilizations there are numerous myths and legends and visual manifestations which prescribe to this belief.

The Greek god Aphroditos has been depicted as a bearded person with the bodily form and dress of a female, but with male sexual organs. The legend behind yet another Greek God Hermaphroditos harks back to the conjoining of the beautiful son of Hermes and Aphrodite with the beautiful nymph of the spring Salamacis, when he had a bath in the spring, into a single being of two sexes as the nymph desired so. The Egyptian Isis-Osiris, the Japanese Izanami-Izanagi, even Hebrew, Mexican and Arab doctrines have mention of their divinities as being bisexual.

The concept of *Yin* and *Yang* in Chinese Taoist thought which centers around the twin principles, *Yin* being the female principle and the *Yang* being the male principle. And it is the activity of the *Yin* and *Yang*

which is responsible for the process of man and nature. In the Bible, the Book of Genesis mentions that the female partner of Adam was created out of his rib, and it was the rib of man who was called the woman.

No where else in the world is the concept of bisexuality explored and delved into as in Indian philosophy and art. Be it the visual manifestation or the philosophical ideology the concept of duality took shapes in various forms and concepts. Beginning with the Vedas itself, the concept of *Puruṣa-Prakṛti*, finds its manifestations in the several pair concepts arising out of the ultimate reality. These divine pairs are composed of one male and one female, to name a few, Aditi and Dakṣha, Dyaus and Pṛthvī, Nārāyaṇa and Ananata, Puruṣa and Prākṛti. The primordial pair Yama and Yamī according to a legend are regarded as the first parent of human beings. "The pair is just one single undivided entity, self-cloven into two halves for the sake of creation."¹

The *Puruṣa-Prakṛti* concept of the Sāṃkhya philosophy extended itself into the religious ideology. A number of divine pairs emerged as a result of this train of thought. The image of Ardhanārīśvara being the most powerful, where the image philosophically represents the union of the creative principles of activity and passivity or masculinity or femininity.

The concept of bisexuality is very much part of Tantric, Vaiṣṇavite, Śakta, Śaivite, and other cultic philosophies as well. In Śaivite and Śakta philosophies the two are inseparable. According to Śaivite philosophy Śakti or Umā is the reflex of Śiva and has no independent existence. In Śaktaism, Śakti or Devī becomes the world mother - one who is one with Brahman. In Tantra the human body is accepted as the best medium for the realization of self-knowledge. It imagines the left side of the human being as female and the right side as male. The union of these two forces, male and female leads one into the realisation of self knowledge. The Kula-kunḍalinī Śakti (serpent-power) is the female force, which resides in the lowest *cakra*, called Mūladhara-cakra. The seat of the male force or Śiva is the *Sahasrara* or the lotus with thousand petals. The rousing of the fema-

1. S. BHATTACHARJI, *The Indian Theogony*, Calcutta, Firma KLM 1978.

le force *Śakti*, lying dormant and her union with the male force *Śiva* in the *Sahasrāra* is the ultimate purpose of *Sadhana*. Tantric Buddhists also believe in the twin principles of male and female as represented by *Upāya* (male) and *Prajñā* (female). The central point in the *Sadhana* of the Tantric Buddhist is also the principle of union of the two aspects of male and female².

Indian philosophy abounds with examples of the concept of bisexuality and its visual manifestation automatically follows. And the concept of Ardhanārīśvara is very much part of Indian philosophy. The image of Ardhanārīśvara, one of the manifestations of Lord Śiva is probably one of the most popular images that has been the object of artistic expression, after the Nāṭarāja aspect of Śiva. Śiva, the foremost god of the Hindu Trinity, combines in Him, the concepts of the male and the female. That Śiva has always the feminine principle within is reinforced by the legend of Mātṛbhūteśvara Śiva, where He took the female form in order to sustain a number of piglets abandoned by their mother³.

The combination of male and female as the concept is not exclusive to only Śaivite theology. Even Viṣṇu is known to have taken the female form as Mohinī. Viṣṇu could turn himself into Mohinī because the female principle was embedded within himself. Viṣṇu represents the female part of the Ardhanārīśvara form⁴.

The Jaina Tīrthaṅkara Mallinatha is also conceived of as a combination of male and female⁵. The Buddhists too adopted the concept of Ardhanārīśvara in the pantheon. In the Tantric work known as *Abhidhānottara Tantra*, there is the reference to a form of the goddess as Ardhanārīśvareśvarī. Interestingly, the representation of the Buddhist version of Ardhanārīśvara form is noticed in an illustrated manuscript No Add 1643 called *Aṣṭasahasrika Prajñāpāramitā*. The

2. S.B. DASGUTPA, *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism*, University of Calcutta, 1974.

3. C. SIVARAMAMURTI, *Nāṭarāja in Indian Art, Thought and Literature*, New Delhi, 1974.

4. *Skanda Purāṇa* (Vasumati edition).

5. U.P. SHAH, "Sculptures from Samalaji and Roda", *Bulletin of the Museum and Picture Gallery, Baroda*, Vol. XIII (Special Number), ed. V.L. Devkar, Baroda, 1960.

manuscript dated 1015 AD contains a labeled miniature painting representing the Buddhist Goddess Tārā. The tantric cult like the *Sakts* believe in the importance of the female entity⁶.

The concept of Ardhanārīśvara is seen as an art motif where iconography plays an important role. I am looking at the concept in a visual dimension. I have not gone into the question of dating, for that itself is another area of research. I am viewing the images purely from a visual representation following art historical processes by way of dress, representation and in cases where the date has already been identified by scholars. For me what is important is the different types and varieties of visual representations which I have encountered.

In most sculptural or painted representations the image of Ardhanārīśvara is shown divided in a vertical manner. Usually Īśvara is on the right and the Goddess is shown on the left side. There are numerous interpretations to indicate the vertical division of the concept.

The Ardhanārīśvara form as an artistic proposition is unique because it rationalizes the combination of the Śaivite and Śakta attributes within a single anthropomorphic form. Sculptures from the length and breadth of India have been noticed by me. These sculptures range from the first century AD to the contemporary period. Not only have such sculptures been found in the North and South of India, but they have been noticed in the sculptural remains from almost all the provinces.

There are basically two ways in which the concept has been interpreted. Some scholars have interpreted it in a syncretic manner, and others in an androgynous one. An androgynous image is one in which the union is biological, genetic by birth and cannot be changed. The dictionary defines the word androgynous as one which unites the physical character of both sexes – a hermaphrodite, also of ambiguous sex, partly male, partly female in appearance. A syncretic image on the other hand is one which is motivated by structure, one which can be changed. The dictionary defines syncretic as aiming at a union, of diverse beliefs in this case of Śiva and Śakti.

6. D.C. BHATTACHARYYA, *Iconology of Composite Images*, New Delhi, 1980.

It is the imagination of the artist which gives a visual form to the concept of Ardhanārīśvara. It is upto the artist how he interprets the image. For example the iconography of the female side of the Ardhanārīśvara image has been drawn from the iconography of all mother goddesses. The iconography of Śiva of course generally conforms to His form. For example the iconography of all mother goddesses are the female versions of their male counterparts and vice versa. They are both interchangeable. In this instance I would like to include the Harihara image, where the image is also termed Miśramūrti. The category is determined by the attitude of the viewer as to how he views the image. The same image can be read in different ways. It is here that the permutation and combinations as expressed by the artists come into play.

Thus the uniqueness of the image is due to the innovation of the artist who often derives his muse from the literary texts and then goes beyond the artistic references and creates an image which is the result not only of his very own creative expression but also the result of the legacy of his own experiences and his reading. In a few examples, both from textual and artistic references, the number of hands of the image seems to be of an odd number, and this appears to be an aberration. But the reason for this is not far to seek. Usually half of the number of hands each of the god and of the goddess are included in the form. Śiva can be two handed, four handed, eight handed, ten handed, and can also have forms with more number of hands. But Pārvatī is usually known, particularly as the wife of Śiva, to have two hands only, although her forms with multiple hands are also not rare. In most of the images the two handed concept of Pārvatī has been in the mind of the artist when half of her form had to be retained in the Ardhanārīśvara form. In view of this, on many occasions, an odd number of hands had to be admitted within the imagery. But these are only distinctive cases. As in all forms of iconography, the vision of the artist and his interpretative approach to the theme doubtless played a dominant role not only in the determination of the number of hands of the Ardhanārīśvara form but also of the selection of the attributes ascribable to the male and the female partners of the form.

The distinction between the iconography of Śiva and Pārvatī is discernible not only in the complete images of Ardhanārīśvara that

are usually known but this distinction is noticeable even in the sculpted heads of the form that are known from the ancient period. (Fig. 1) These heads contain the distinguishing features like the matted hair, third eye, different earrings, ascribed to the male and the female parts of the image to which these heads belonged. In the textual description we come across only the standing form while several images show the seated type of the image. (Fig. 2)

After studying the textual materials of the descriptive types pertaining to the Ardhanārīśvara form and the actual available images, it is found that the correspondence between the text and the image is not direct or verbatim. The texts pertain basically to two types of the image, one in which the form has an odd number of hands, and the other in which the number of hands is even. But in none of the cases is the number of hands mentioned to be more than four. The situation is not the same in the sculptural descriptions. In the sculptural examples observed and seen till now, the number of hands of the images is found to vary from two to twenty, although the most popular form of the image seems to be the four handed type, if we go by the consideration of numerical strength and the expanse of the area of distribution. In painting however, on many occasions, the multihanded form, often with an odd number of hands can be seen. (Fig. 3)

In matters of details also there are many points of deviation, as additions and alterations, from the textual prescriptions, as noticed in the sculptural examples. As mentioned earlier, the texts do not speak of the seated form of Ardhanārīśvara, not at least the prescriptive texts. But the seated form seems to be quite common in the sculptural depictions, as also in the painted versions. There is another point of departure between the text and image is seen in respect of the dancing form of Ardhanārīśvara. The texts do not refer to this unless by indirect implication when they speak of the *tāṇḍava* and *lāsya* dances of Śiva and Pārvatī. In the sculptural depictions a number of dancing forms can be seen. (Fig. 4) In this connection it should be mentioned that I have not come across any sculptural examples of the Mahiṣamardīnī form of Ardhanārīśvara, although its painted version is not unknown, as evidenced by an example from the Kangra painting. (as in Fig. 3)

Ardhanārīśvara images have been found in almost all parts of India. Even though there is not a sharp differentiation among the

sculptural representations, there are undoubtedly some regional variations, preferences and priorities which are noticeable. There are important Śaivite centers both in North and South India. But certain images are more common in the South than in the North. In South India the seated forms of Ardhanārīśvara seem to be more popular than in the North. In South Indian figures the erect phallus of Śiva is not so commonly shown, whereas this feature is quite common in North Indian images. As in the physiognomy of the form, in the drapery too some South Indian images seem to take more care in the treatment of the male and female side, clearly demarcating the difference between the two. The three handed form of Ardhanārīśvara seems to be more common in South Indian images, although this type is not altogether unknown in the North.

In addition to these regional variations there are certain images which are absolutely unusual, and are particularly significant in respect of various points of interpretative approach to the theme. A unique image from the collection of a *gurukula* at Jhajjar in Haryana stands out deserving special attention. This type is the one representing the Ardhanārīśvara form against the background of a Śivaliṅga. This seems to be an interpretation of the theme put forth by the artist, because from the legends pertaining to the theme we do not find any specific association of the *śivaliṅga* with the Ardhanārīśvara concept. However in many images the Ardhanārīśvara form shows the erect phallus to indicate the Śiva side. But the representation of the Ardhanārīśvara image against the Śivaliṅga is doubtless a new interpretation to the theme.

This imagery, or perhaps this artistic motif of the form, arrests our attention more for the reason that we have come across as many as three such images, all of them having not only similar iconographic features, but also a similar look. The find spot of one of the images is Jhajjar, another is preserved in the Los Angeles County Museum, (Fig. 5) which is almost a replica of the Jhajjar image and the third which is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum is also similar in iconography and general appearance. (Fig. 6) Possibly all three belong to the same school of iconography, also to the same region, wherein such a visual concept became popular due to circumstances not commonly known.

The Liṅgāyata sect or the Vīraśiva sect, which is a derivative of the Śaivite cult, had a predilection for showing the importance of the *liṅga*. It is not unlikely that all these three images, constituting a single type were made by or through the patronage of the people subscribing to the specific faith of this sect. In this connection I would like to mention another very interesting image of Ardhanārīśvara which has been shown in association with the *śivaliṅga* figure from the Abhimukteśvara temple at Kodaganallūr in the Tirunelveli, taluk and district of Tamil Nadu in South India. (Fig. 7) Here the Śivaliṅga is shown in front of the Ardhanārīśvara image, and not at the back as in the three images mentioned earlier. The image draws our attention more because we know of another unique iconic form of the goddess in which a prominent *śivaliṅga* is shown in the front. This image is from Kagajipara of Munsigañj district of Bangladesh and now preserved in the Dacca Museum. (Fig. 8) The identification of the image has been problematic for years together, and three prominent scholars of Indian iconography, N.K. Bhattasali, R.D. Banerji, and J.N. Banerjee, have suggested various identificatory interpretations for this image. It is commonly accepted that this is the representation of the goddess Mahāmāya, and it visualizes the concept of the goddess's front. But with the help of the textual evidence derived from the *Skanda Purāṇa* the image was later identified as representing the *Apītakūca* form of Pārvatī, and it constitutes the concept not of emergence but of a merger of the goddess with the *śivaliṅga*.

It seems that the Ardhanārīśvara image from Kodaganallūr and the image from Kagajipara give expression of almost a similar concept, although in the latter the form of the goddess is not androgynous. Both these images have four hands, although the attributes in them are different. It is surprising that two similar images of almost the same iconographic ideology have been found, though distanced from one another by thousands of miles. Perhaps there developed a sect which subscribed to the identity of the *śivaliṅga* and the Supreme goddess. With just a few random examples it is too early to come to any conclusion about the proper cultic significance, but it seems unlikely that all the three Ardhanārīśvara images, with the *śivaliṅga* at the back, and the two other images of the goddess one of them in the Ardhanārīśvara form with the *śivaliṅga* in the front belong to a distinct devotional concept.

Another interesting image is of a hermaphrodite figure which has a direct bearing on the theme of Ardhanārīśvara. This image is in the form of a silver plate found in the region of Ancient Lampsacos now included in Northwestern Turkey. (Fig. 9) The piece is now preserved in the Istanbul Museum. Noticed as early as 1900, by scholars, a detailed analytical study of this unique representation has been made by B.N. Mukherjee⁷ and later by M.K. Dhavalikar⁸. Mukherjee describes the image in the following way.

«The plate portrays a human figure facing front and sitting on a backless chair, the legs of which are made of elephant tusks. The figure wears a 'sārti' a part of which covers the left of the chest and the left shoulder, and is also adorned with a necklace, bangles, armlets and sandals. The figure, locks of whose hair hang down towards the shoulders, has two horns on the head. The right hand of the figure is lifted in the gesture of imparting protection, while the left hand holds a bow.»

«On each side of the chair stands a Hanuman monkey, each distinguished by the long hind limbs and tail (in spite of the slight misrepresentation of the face). There is a collar around the neck of each. Underneath the chair, two keepers hold in check with rope two animals identifiable probably as leopards or tigers (or lionesses). On the right of the central figure stands a parrot, and in the left one can see a guinea-hen».

«The figure has been considered as that of a lady. No doubt it has the appearance of a female. However only one of the breasts, (the right one) is depicted. There is no indication of the other one under the garment worn over the left shoulder. It appears that the figure is half male and half female»⁹.

Mukherjee opines that the figure represents India as a woman, and supports it on the evidence of the personification of Rome, Egypt, Africa in the Art of the Roman Empire¹⁰. The figure has been dated to

7. B.N. MUKHERJEE, *Nana on lion, a study in Kushana Numismatic Art*, Calcutta, 1969.

8. M.K. DHAVILKAR, "Lampsacos Disc – A Reconsideration", in *Dimensions of Indian Art*, ed. Lokesh Chandra et. al., Delhi, 1986.

9. MUKHERJEE, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

about the first century A.D. by both Mukherjee and Dhavalikar. Both the scholars have upheld the theory that this art piece is of Indian origin, perhaps informed by the Kushana art but executed outside the country. It is difficult to come to any conclusion regarding its exact source of origin and also about the purpose to which this image was made. But there is no doubt that herein we find a unique representation of the Ardhanārīśvara concept.

For the combined form of the God and the Goddess various nomenclatures have been used in the texts. The most common is Ardhanārīśvara, the other variants are Nāra-Nārīmayamūrti, Umārdhamūrti, Gaurīśvaramūrti, Kāntasammīśradeha. The Vaiṣṇavite parallel of the form is known as Ardhalakṣmīhari and the Vāsudeva Kamalaja. In each of them there is the suggestion of the equal participation of the male and female principles in a single form.

An unusual parallel includes one from the Devi-ri-Kothi, Chamba, Himanchal Pradesh and presently housed in the Bhuri Singh Museum. An Ardhanārīśvara image, the iconography of the image suggests that it is one of Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa astride a lion: this indicates the coming together of Viṣṇu and *Lakṣmī*. The syncreticism of the Ardhanārīśvara image is further established in the case of Śakti Gaṇapati. In the case of the Śakti-Gaṇapati image the division is not only vertical but horizontal as well. It further emphasizes the syncreticism of the image. Had the image been androgynous the division would have had to be vertical. Perhaps it was also the need of the time, the Śakta Gaṇapati has the head which is that of the elephant headed God, there is no vertical division in the head, the presence of a single female breast. Even in the female counterpart of Gaṇeśvarī, as stated in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, the iconography of the goddess is the same as that of the God. In the female form, the femininity is shown again by the female breast, the head being that of the God. (Fig. 10).

The Śakta Gaṇapati has yet another interpretation, that of combining three cults, and not two as in the case of Ardhanārīśvara – where it was a combine of Śiva and the Pārvatī, or in the Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa image where it was a combine of Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī. The Śakta Gaṇapati combines three cults that of Śiva, Gaṇapati and Śakti. Gaṇeśa is Śiva, the head of Gaṇapati refers to the Gaṇapatīya cult and the female breast is representative of Śakti.

In the artistic representations out of the hundreds of images seen, there is seen in addition to the regional variations in numerous images from South India, a reversal of the right left ascription of Śiva and Pārvatī – normally Pārvatī is assigned to the left side and Śiva the right side. This is usual because the female consort is supposed to be on the left side of the male counterpart as implied in her appellation Vāma. But in many images there is an oddity where Śiva is shown on the left side instead of the usual right. Whether it is a mistake on the part of the artist or is it part of his imagination or whether the image pertains or is indicative of any cultic or sectarian prescription is not clear. It is possible that the differences occurred because of the respective approaches of the *vāmacara* (left side) and *dakṣiṇacara* (right side) of the Śaiva community. The Śakta's also have two sects among them and accordingly they show similar predilections in their iconographic forms. In Bengal for example there are two types of the goddess, one known as Vāma Kālī and the other as Dakṣiṇa Kālī, the former stepping forward with the first movement of the left foot and the latter with the right foot respectively.

The availability of material has been incredible, and more and more images are still being identified. As a visual manifestation the variety of images and their manifold representations point to the individual interpretation of philosophy and also to the various cultic following. A lot many other variants and interpretations can be looked into as we go into a detailed study of the form.

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Fig.1 Ardhanārīśvara Head from Madhya Pradesh dated 5th century A.D.



Fig. 2 Seated 3 armed image of Ardhanārīśvara from Kandiur in Thanjavur district, Tamil Nadu.

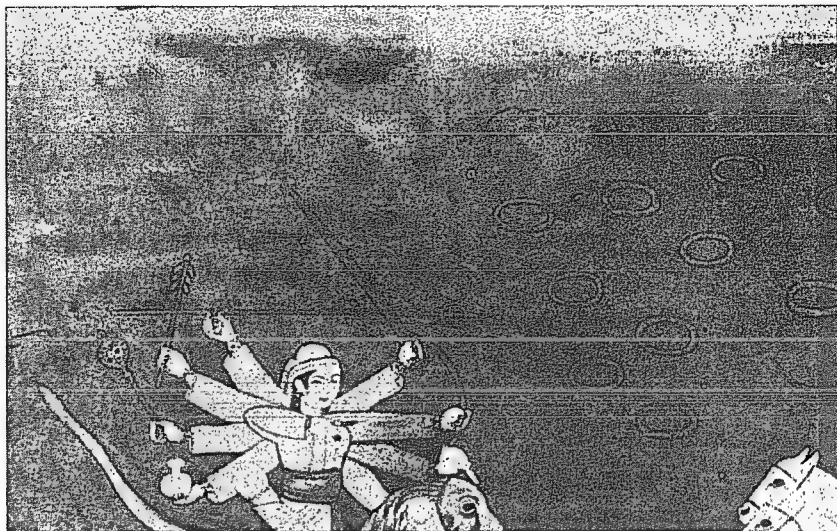


Fig. 3 Ardhanārīśvara in Painting from Kangra dated 18th century.



Fig. 4 Dancing Ardhanārīśvara Naṭeśa Image from Rani Pokri Nepal dated 13th century.



Fig. 5 Ardhanārīśvara from Mathurā dated 3rd century A.D.



Fig. 6 Ardhanārīśvara from Mathurā Kuṣāṇa period 2nd century A.D.

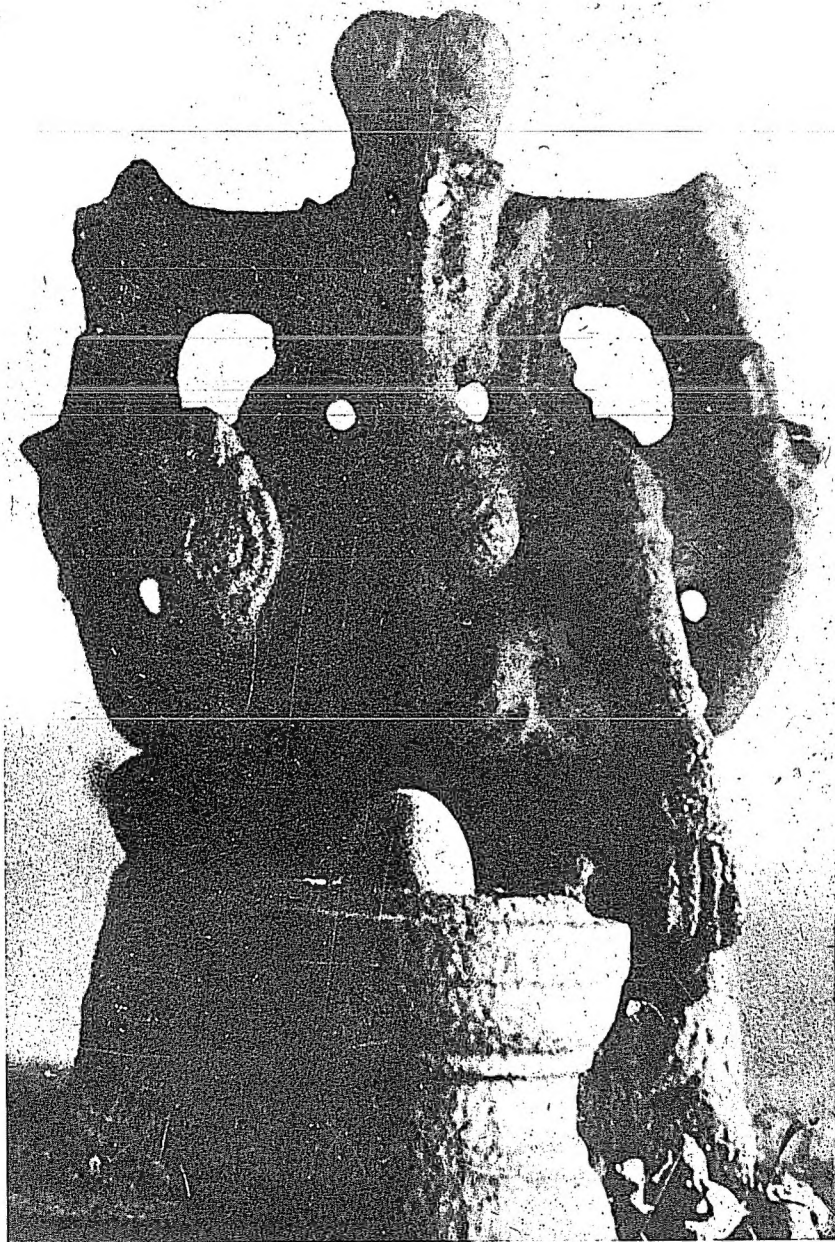


Fig. 7 Seated four armed image from the Abhimuktesvarar Temple, Kodaganallūr, Tamil Nadu.



Fig. 8 Ardhanārīśvara from Kagajipara from district Munsigang in Bangladesh. Presently at the Dacca Museum.



Fig. 9 Ardhanārīśvara Disc from North Western Turkey.

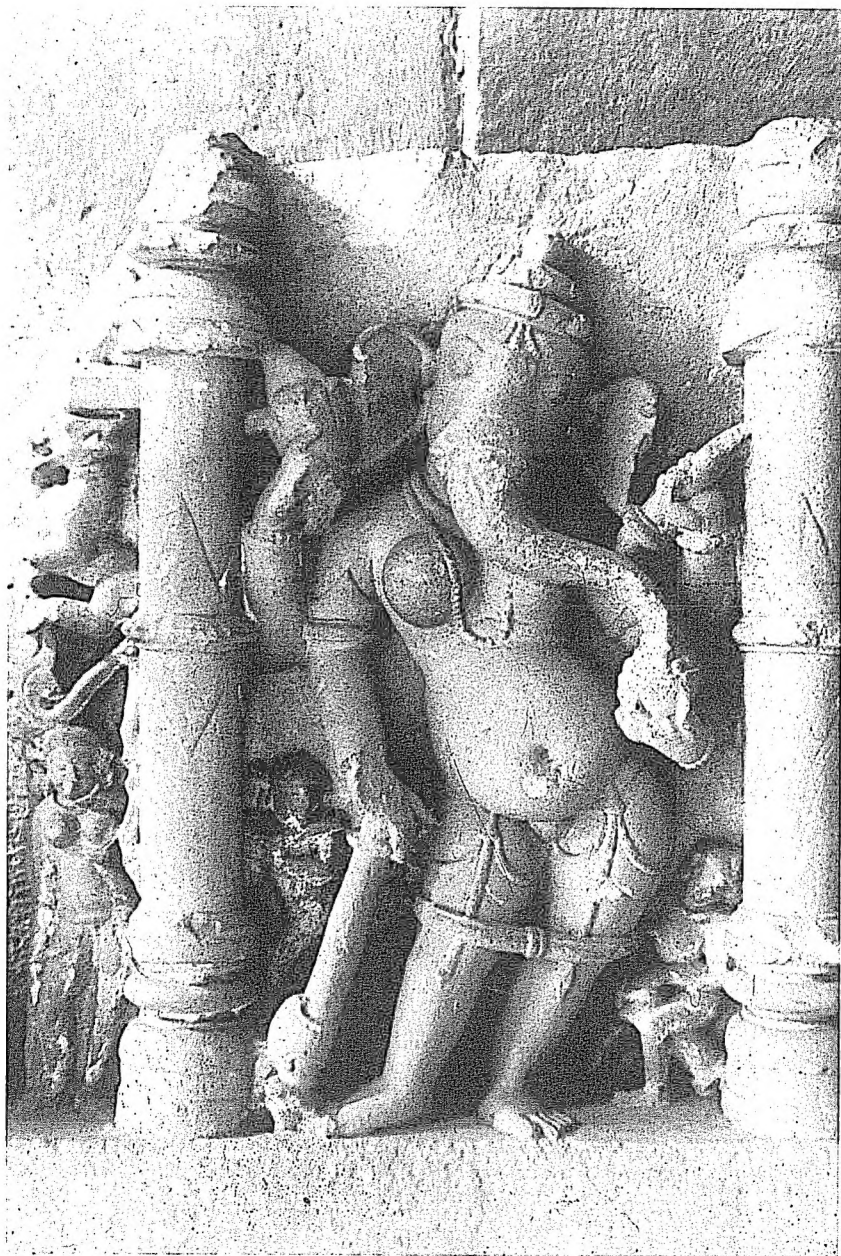


Fig. 10 Ardhanārīśvara, standing four armed image from Padhavali, Morena, Madhya Pradesh. 9th-10th century.